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How green is our architecture?

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THE PAWTUCKET ARMORY was built in 1895, the last of four armories in the city. The first, built in 1825 and known as the Alarm Post, and the second, built in 1859 for the Pawtucket Light Guard, were designed to drill and quarter units of state militia, but eventually served other purposes. The third armory, known first as Battery Hall and then as Infantry Hall, started out as a church.

The current Pawtucket Armory housed Rhode Island National Guard units until 1996, and is now a performing-arts center. During most of its life as an armory, however, it hosted dances, political rallies and inaugurations, Social Security sign-ups, YMCA circuses, Girl Scout jamborees and other social and civic functions. Last weekend, along with Tolman High School (1925), Pawtucket City Hall (1935) and the Gamm Theatre (2003), the armory hosted the 22nd annual conference of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission.



The theme this year was “Something Old, Something Green.” In fact, the Pawtucket Armory exemplifies the importance of historic preservation in building a sustainable environment.

After all, the most intrinsically “green” buildings are those that already exist. This is because constructing a new building consumes 15 to 30 times the building’s annual energy use. Reusing it after its original purpose is obsolete makes an old building even greener, because the new purpose does not require a new building. On the other hand, demolishing an old building to erect a new one subverts the environment. This holds true even if green technologies reduce energy consumption in the new building. Most of the energy saved would merely make up for the energy already wasted by tearing down the old building and putting up the new one.

As discussed at a number of the conference seminars, the recently developed system for certifying a proposed building's green status gives short shrift to the energy efficiency of old buildings and their reuse. The Leadership for Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification process treats only a small part of true sustainability. The ultimate green building using no external energy at all will cause, depending on where it is erected, a waste of energy (in gasoline) greater than the value of the energy saved in a year by the building's green gadgetry.

Therefore, the real green movement is not LEED but Smart Growth and New Urbanism, which promote sustainable planning at the regional and local levels. Historic preservation plays a big role in both movements. Both press for higher population density and reuse of existing road and utility infrastructure. But in their emphasis on historical context and sense of place, both also tend to promote new buildings of traditional design, upon which many preservation professionals look with the same jaundiced eye as modern architects and other design elites.

A panel of experts at the conference — including its keynote speaker, Jean Carroon, of the Boston architects Goody Clancy — pooh-poohed the idea that new traditional architecture might promote sustainability better than modernism. Preservation's reluctance to embrace its true allies may be understandable, but it remains perilously shortsighted.

It's understandable because historic preservation is clearly not about building anew, but shortsighted because the goals of the preservation movement are inimical to the interests of the powerful corporate building and design elites that dominate the industry. After all, every building preserved prevents the design and construction of a new building. No wonder LEED spurns the obvious ecological benefits of preservation and adaptive reuse. To play those benefits down while playing up the narrower benefits — however important — of green energy savings is environmentally counterproductive.

The push is on to mandate local, state and federal LEED standards for development projects, be they new construction or adaptive reuse. Until the LEED system is changed to give equal (if not more) weight to the broader sustainability of adaptive reuse, preservationists should resist this trend.

If the government wants to require yet another level of design standards, it would get more green for the (builders') buck by mandating the use of natural materials from the region that last longer and needn't be transported from afar. Or buildings with windows that open, and central courtyards that admit natural light and air. (Sick Building Syndrome is caused by Ugly Building Syndrome.) Why not pass laws forcing architects to use classical ornament to build public affection for buildings? Such insurance against demolition might lead to genuinely sustainable cities and towns with a greater sense of place, and a public with a stronger sense of civic pride.

In short, build new buildings with the same qualities that make old buildings worth preserving. That is what preservationists should fight for. All the ammunition they need is waiting for them at places like the Pawtucket Armory, if they will join the battle.